



ISSUES FACED BY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF LAO(S) IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies three dimensions of the Issues Faced by Undergraduate Students of Laos in Speaking English. The first gap their English pronunciations are interference of the phonemic inventory of their mother tongue. The second, underlying factors behind the problems are no chance to enhance at various levels especially English of Daily Life and at School. The third issues are students fear to face the native speakers. Thus to communicate by influencing, the college system must provide the strategies for improvement and see the real issues for the next generation.

KEYWORDS: Language, Teaching, Learning, issue, improvement.

INTRODUCTION:

English being the lingua-franca of the world today, it is of high value to be able to communicate in this language in a fluent manner. However, there are several factors that make it hard if not impossible for a non-native speaker to attain native-like fluency in a second language. This can also be seen in the nationals of Laos. Even after going through English spoken classes and having English in their undergraduate curriculum, the students are still not able to reach an adequate level of spoken skill. It is in this light, that this study was done to identify the gaps in the speaking skill of undergraduate students of Souphanouvong University, Laos; identify the underlying reasons behind the gaps; and provide a possible solution for the issues.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

The review of related literature is a very important aspect of any research both for planning a work as well as to show its relevance and significance. The review is an appraising description of information found in the literature associated to a selected area of research.

Keeping in view, the importance of the related literature and realizing the necessity and purpose of survey of related literature, the researcher levels into the available literature, the reviews of a few of which have been given below:

Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning by R. C. Gardner & W. E. Lambert (1972): In his book, Gardner states that motivation is a huge part of language learning and learners should be encouraged to stay motivated with the help of language games. Also the book states that learners should be encouraged to think for themselves and make observations in order to learn a language.

Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching by Jack C. Richards, Theodore S. Rodgers (2014): The first edition of this book was published in 1986, followed by the second edition in 2001. The third edition of this book contains three parts all of which give an ample description of most of the approaches there are in the field of Language Teaching and Learning.

Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching: The Case of Thailand by P. Darasawang and H. Reinders (2016): This book is a collection of scholarly articles about the innovation being introduced in Thailand for teaching English and their probable effects both in Thailand and abroad. It investigates the ways in which new developments in areas of language teaching practice, such as policymaking, planning, methodology and the use of educational technology spread globally and are adopted, rejected or adapted locally.

International Perspectives on Teaching the Four Skills in ELT: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing by Anne Burns & Joseph Siegel (2017): This book is a collection of wide variety of articles having a wide range of insights on teaching and learning of the four skills speaking, listening, reading and writing, which are important for being proficient in any language. The authors analyze a wide range of teaching and learning contexts, including primary, secondary, tertiary, private, and adult ESL/EFL classes. In doing so, they provide locally relevant accounts that nonetheless resonate with other contexts and wider concerns.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The present study deals with three objectives as follows:

- to identify the gaps in the speaking skill of undergraduate Lao students.

- to identify the underlying issues behind these gaps
- to identify the learning problems of Laos students
- to suggest a set of steps to resolve these issues.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study follows the inductive approach to research i.e. based on the problems observed during the study, the conclusions were made. In this research, I have selected 30 students among the 30 students 15 male students and 15 female students. It also includes field work where undergraduate students from Souphanouvong University in Laos were tested for their English speaking skill on the basis of which the identification, analysis and categorization of the issues faced by the students were done. Following this, a set of strategies was suggested to be followed at different levels of education in Laos, so as to reduce and ultimately eradicate these issues.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

The main focus of this study are the undergraduate students of Laos from Souphanouvong University, who have been exposed to English Learning classes before this study. They were tested for their English-speaking skill on the basis of which the identification of the issues which they have were identified on the four linguistic levels i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics.

This study does not include students from any other levels of education or from any other country. It is limited to the undergraduate students of Laos only. Laos and English Language in Laos

Laos is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia, and it lies mostly between latitudes 14° and 23°N (a small area is south of 14°), and longitudes 100° and 108°E. It is divided into 17 provinces and prefectures including the capital Vientiane. It is an underdeveloped country and its economy is heavily dependent on investments and trades from other countries due to which it is necessary for the people to be fluent in other languages including English. However, due to the various differences between English and Lao, the official language of Laos, it has been really difficult for the people to speak, understand, read and write English even after learning the language. A brief comparison has been given below.

Comparison between English and Lao Language:

Inflection languages such as English are inflected for case, tense, number, or gender. On the other hand, languages such as Lao are not inflected for case, tense, number or gender. These information are derived based on the construction and context of the spoken sentences.

Lao and English are both SVO languages. However, both of them have some different aspects: (a) Demonstratives in Lao follow the noun while in English they precede the noun; (b) In Lao language, adjectives follow the noun they modify, in contrast, adjective in English are written or spoken before the noun they modify; (c) English is inflected for case, tense, number, or gender. On the other hand, languages such as Lao are not inflected for case, tense, number or gender.

ELT in Laos:

In Laos, English teaching is not common in Primary and Elementary schools. There are very few English medium schools and the students get exposed to English only when they reach college or when they opt for English Coaching which is also not common. Students from villages have little or no exposure while stu-

dents from cities are a little better in English than their village counterparts. Also these students don't have any opportunity to practice what they have learned, in their daily lives which is a big hindrance in English language learning for them.

Importance of English in Laos:

English is very important in Laos in the current situation when all the information available on the internet can be found in English and not in the Lao language. So, to avail these learning options on the mass media, one needs to be proficient in reading and listening skills in English. Also being proficient in English provides them with higher education options with better job opportunities and foreign trade options. However, in lack of school level English language classes, students start learning the language after their critical age, starting from their college or with the help of courses available in the coaching centres, which creates problems for them in their learning process.

English courses available in the country range from basic to intermediate level. Both teacher centred and student centred teaching-learning techniques are used with the help of a variety of tools like internet, library, field study, observation, etc. depending on the level required by the student. The teachers involved have graduate, postgraduate and doctoral level education. However, unless it's a foreign teacher, the quality of teaching is not exemplary which affects the learning double fold.

❖ Gaps found in English Speaking Skill of Laos Students and the Underlying Issues:

In this research provides some of the data that represents the gaps between the fluency of a native English speaker and the students of Laos who have learned English as a second language. The errors have been categorized on the basis of the four levels of Linguistics and have been analyzed.

❖ Phonological Gaps:

The pronunciation of English sounds in the Laos students' speech is mostly affected due to the interference of the phonemic inventory of their mother tongue; the lesser number of consonant clusters in Laos unlike English; and differences in the syllable structure of the two languages among others. A few of them are listed below:

Phonological variations:

No	words	English (phonetically transcription)	Lao (transcribed phonetically)
1	watch	/wɒtʃ/	/wat/
2	visit	/vɪzɪt/	/visɪʃ/
3	free	/fri:/	/fi:/
4	matter	/ˈmætə/	/metʌrs/
5	present	/prɛzˈent/, /ˈpiɛzən/	/plɪsen/
6	school	/skool/, /sku:l/	/səku:/, /sku:/
7	famous	/ˈfeɪməs/	/fremʌs/
8	friends	/frɛndz/	/fræs/
9	Help	/hɛlp/, /help/	/hev/
10	talk	/tɔ:k/, /to:k/	/tə/

- Problems while pronouncing: 'l' word finally 'r' in all places; consonant clusters; adding a back vowel before the 's' sound word initially, etc.
- In cases of words like 'watch', some students pronounce the final sound as 't' instead of 'ch'.
- Incorrect pronunciation of rounded vowels.
- Pronunciation of word final 't' as 's', like 'giant' becomes 'gias'; 'visit' becomes 'visis', etc.
- Insertion of 'r' with the syllable initial sound occasionally i.e. 'famous' becomes 'framous'; 'because' becomes 'becrause', etc.
- Deletion of 's' and 'k' in a word-medial consonant cluster like 'destination' becomes 'detination'; 'attraction' becomes 'attration', etc.
- Dental sounds become retroflex, like 'the' to 'de', etc.

❖ Morphological Gaps:

Most of the Morphological errors were related to the affixes, which were either missing or used incorrectly. The Lao language does not use affixes for concepts like tense, aspect, plurality, gender, etc. These concepts are either conveyed with the use of a whole word or understood with the help of the context. Hence, the errors that came up in the data were mostly related to the wrong use of affixes or affixed words. Some of the examples have been provided below together with their usage in the sentences:

- ...central of London: adjectival suffix used incorrectly.
- ...hopefully to visit...: adverbial suffix used incorrectly.
- After finish the school...: missing aspect suffix (-ing).
- ...will make you happy and relax: missing tense suffix (-ed) in relaxed.
- ...two reason to telling you...: incorrect use of aspect suffix (-ing)
- some attraction places to visit...: use of nominal suffix (-tion) instead of adjectival suffix (-I've)
- ...many reason...: absence of plurality suffix (-s)
- ...help me success in the things...: absence of verbal suffix (-eed)

❖ Syntactic Gaps:

- There are many reasons to visit London.
- These are some attraction places to visit such as...
- Historic castle in the central of London
- London is a capital city of England
- It's the famous and exciting city
- I am student at...
- I hopefully to visit London
- London is the best one city of the world
- Today I am going to talking about the free time
- All people around the world have the free time but different
- Some people have the long but some people have the short time
- My free time, I like to listen to the music, play game on the smart phone and watch videos
- Listen to the music will make you happy and relax
- I have not too much of the free time
- I have go to work
- In the weekend, I have to go to the work early
- I have two reason to telling you why I does love school
- Our school is like my second house
- I start school when I five years old and now I am twenty so I am still at school
- School give bring me a lot like job, friends and notice.
- They are four people in my family including me, my mother, my father, elder sister
- So I am the young child.
- ...because she is always cook something delicious.
- In my addition, family is very important for me.
- Family fulfil our need.....and beside me when I am feeling down, they take care me a lot.
- They help me success in the things what I want.
- ...and without them not to be who I am today.

From the data presented in the previous section, it can be seen that the main types of errors made by the students were:

- Absence of agreement between syntactic constituents.
- Wrong placement of negatives.
- Missing verb and noun inflections.

- Wrong use of derivational suffixes.
- Absence or wrong use of word classes like determiners and prepositions.
- Wrong or no use of auxiliary verbs.
- Wrong use of pronouns.
- Use of wrong expletive subjects.
- Missing or incorrect use of 'to' infinitive marker.

The reason behind these mistakes is again the influence of the mother tongue of the speakers over their English speech. It is interesting to see that the students don't often repeat their mistakes, which shows that they know the correct usage and do use it but while trying to speak without any prior notice, their mother tongue influence takes over.

In the Lao language, there is no affixation and the language also doesn't use any determiners and the use of helping verbs and preposition is not compulsory which leads to most of the errors.

CONCLUSION:

Being a multilingual can have many advantages. Knowing a language can not only help in the broadening of the horizons of knowledge for a person but it also enhances a person's psychological as well as social development. However it becomes really hard for a person to learn a language after the critical age of 14 years. The main issue that can be seen with the Laos students is that they only get a chance to learn the language when they reach college especially in the rural areas. There is little or no exposure to the English language at school level, which is why there is a heavy influence of their native language on their English speech. Hence, the suggestion made through this study is that the government should start English language education at the school level when the children have the highest capability to learn the nuances of a language.

Another possible suggestion is that at the college level as well, before starting to teach English as a subject, the students should be made to practice the sounds of English and the concepts which are different in Laos and English should be made clear before making the students to learn the language.

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